

[O, Happy Distances!]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [7?] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park No.

DATE December 12, 1938

SUBJECT O, Happy Distances!

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of Interview 1370 Clinton Ave.
3. Name and address of informant Sam Golstein address above
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

None

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

This is a four-room apartment; cheeful surroundings, not too ornate fixtures: studio couch, chairs, lounge in sitting-room; apartment is on ground floor front, has an air of being accessible and informal.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park N.

DATE

SUBJECT O, HAPPY DISTANCES! (SAM GOLDSTEIN)

1. Ancestry Jewish (Russian?)
2. Place and date of birth U. S. A. About 1901
3. Family No information yet
4. Places lived in, with dates

Almost entire life spent around Claremont Parkway section of the Bronx

5. Education, with dates

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No exact information yet.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Has worked as linoleum layer, handyman, liquor salesman, storekeeper, taxi driver.

7. Special skills and interests

Has good singing voice, ingratiating personality, has acted as-master-of-ceremonies at neighborhood-affairs.

8. Community and religious activities

Previously was active in social clubs, neighborhood groups

9. Description of informant

about 37 but looks much younger; rather handsome, well-built, over medium height, dark curly hair inclined to thinness.

10. Other Points gained in interview

Has half-hearted desire to write stories and probably could do so if he made serious effort. Good speaker.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

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NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park N.

DATE

SUBJECT O, HAPPY DISTANCES! (SAY GOLDSTEIN)

(Sam Goldstein, Native of Claremont Parkway, reminisces)

Everybody wants to write stories at one time or another, I guess, and I'm no exception. One thing I'd like to write about, if I had the gumption to sit down and write, is that migic magic sense of distances that a kid has. I don't know just how to explain it. You walk around a corner and it's a different world. Maybe it all depends on where you spend your childhood. For instance, the Claremont Parkway section was already something of a slum when my family moved there, but it had some aspects of the country too. Just a few blocks west, at Jerome Avenue and 170th Street, was a farm where my father used to take us kids occasionally to get milk straight from the cow. Wouldn't believe it, would you? I remember that short trip as if it were a great adventure. Ah, you can't get that feeling again after you're grown up. People change, and move away, and when you meet them again they're different inside as well as outside, [nd] you begin to feel a little lonely and gypped. I guess that's why "blues" writers make so much money.

Sure, I'm a native of Claremont Parkway, and very proud of it. It was called Wendover Avenue in the old days, but we knew it better as "Benzine Alley" because of the fires - sometimes three and four a day, that used to break out there like a rash. The clang, clang, clang; of the fire-engines became so familiar to us kids that even we stopped chasing after it. We had plenty of other things on 2 the agenda - gang-fights, hazings, open-air movies....life was pretty exciting stuff to us. I belonged to a gang of mighty tough kids. Many of them got into the beer racket later on, and afterwards took over the numbers

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racket in the Bronx. I could tell you plenty of stories about those guys but some other time, now now.

The leader of our gang was called Butch. Not because it was a hard-guy name or anything, but because his old man was a butcher. Well, anybody who disobeyed this Butch would get, sure as fate, a handful of horsemanure chucked right smack in his face. And then maybe the subordinate would get in his licks. You know, every leader has to have his subordinate, his right-hand man, to help carry out his orders. In our gang, this was a small kid but very tough - I don't know how it is, but sometimes these little guys who have to jump up to smack you, turn out to be the worst terrors of all. Well, this subordinate had a favorite trick of punishing offenders. He would wait until the unlucky guy turned around, then he would let him have it, right in the center, with that pointed shoe of his. But I mean he never missed! Oh, he was a killer, and the funniest part was that I came across him afterward, years later, and he had turned out to be a runt - about five foot two, emaciated looking, and very refined! And I thought to myself: why you puny little bastard, to think of all the tortures I endured from you, and now I can break you in half practically! But of course, it was all gone and forgotten.

In the summertime, the gang used to run around barefooted like country kids even though the streets were paved. I once got my foot run over by one of those three-cornered ice wagons, and was laid up over a month. My mother had to wheel me in a carriage to the clinic. It wasn't a regular clinic, you understand. There was a Doctor Bruddas who had opened his own private clinic, and all the poor people in the neighborhood went to him. No matter what was wrong with you, this Doctor used to give what they called "the brown medicine." It was ordinary rhubarb syrup, but I guess people were very credulous in those days, or else it was just that they couldn't go anyplace else, and he charged only a nominal sum. My mother once went to him for rheumatism of the leg, and even we kids knew that no medicine would do any good for that ailment, but sure enough she came home with the same "brown medicine!" We were sore as the devil, but my mother was sold on the

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idea that all sickness comes from the stomach. "Ov de muggin is gut," she would say, "is allus gut." (If the stomach is good, everything is good.)

The kid who was really my lifelong partner from the time we were about four years old till recently, when he died, was Harry Mann. We lived in the same houses for many years; his parents were very friendly with mine, you see, and I was a sort of portector to him. He was always a frail guy, and kids had a habit of picking on him, I guess. But I usually managed to get him out of scrapes, except one time when we were both set on by the Park Avenue gang . . .

It was this way: For years our Brook Avenue gang had led a separate existence from the Park Avenue kids who were one block away from us, but cut off by the New York Central tracks that face the back of the Brook Avenue buildings. That is, there were footbridges connecting the two avenues, but only at intervals of about a half mile, so that we had to make the trip all the way around Claremont Parkway, and we were at 171st Street. So one day they erect a new bridge at 171st Street, and then the feud begins! You know how serious these kid gangs can be about their activities. Well, we organized regular battles, with one gang winning first and then another, but it was murder if you got caught in enemy territory without the gang for protection.

But one day Harry and I decided to take a chance. We were sent on an errand and were too lazy to go around Claremont way, so we crossed over the bridge, watching to see that nobody was around. In one of the empty lots the Park Avenue kids had built a shack out of cardboard and some wood, and a little tin. Well, sure enough, these kids had been hiding there and waited until we passed, then they swarmed out and surrounded us. I fought my way out alright, and reached the bridge, but when I turned around there was Harry being dragged back to the shack by the gang. I was scared as hell because I didn't know what they would do to him. So I ran as fast as I could to tell Harry's mother.

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In Harry's house, pandemonium broke loose. His mother shrieks gevult, grabs her shawl and starts down the stairs with ejaculations coming out of her like bullets. Naturally the neighbors are aroused, and they ask me: "What is it, what is it?" because they can't make head or tail out of what Harry's mother is saying. Believe me, I felt important. And thrilled. "The gang grabbed Harry", I whispered. That magic word "gang" begins to spread through the whole tenement, and then through the whole block. By the time we reach the corner, Harry's mother out in front, with her hands to her breasts, running in that funny agitated way that portly women do, there's a regiment of women behind. They grabbed anything they could get hold of, and they've got murder in their eyes. So when those Park Avenue kids, or their lookout see that army coming over the bridge, they don't ask any questions, but they beat it out of there in a hurry. Then Harry comes out of the shack, bawling of course, but more frightened than anything else. So I got credit for the rescue; the women relieved their feelings by patting me on the head, But Harry and I both got scoldings from our mothers, and we were told never to cross the bridge again.

Yes, it was lots of fun being a kid. Even going to schul (Synagogue) was fun. Harry's father was very religious, a real religious type, and he was responsible for making me go. My own parents didn't care much one way or the other. But every Friday, rain or shine, Mr. Minsky - that was Harry's real name, I forgot to tell you - he comes tapping at our door with his cane: "Nu, nu - s'schain tsite!" (Well, well, it's time already!) It wasn't so bad; Harry and I were both inquisitive kids, we didn't take anything for granted, and soon we began to find things out for ourselves.

One particular ceremony, you know, calls for praying with a shawl wrapped around your head, and it's supposed to be a sin or something to look through the shawl. If you do, they say you're sure to be struck blind. That's the ceremony where a special sect known as "Kains" are permitted to stand up in front of the altar in their stockings, and they pray for the others, the lower-grade Jews. Well, we discussed this punishment between ourselves, Harry and I, and we decided it was a bluff. But who was going to take 5 a chance on going

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blind? Finally, we arranged to look at the same time, but only out of one eye. That way, we only took the risk of being half-blinded. The signal was supposed to be a cough, and I was supposed to give it.

Comes the ceremony. The dovening (chanting) begins: you know, the buzz of voices: Boruch elohainoo adenoï ("Praised be the Lord") (?) . . . and all the rest, and then the Kains get up and take their shoes off, and we all slip the shawls over our faces. I didn't have the nerve to do it right there in the middle of such a solemn and beautiful ritual, and I tried and tried, but couldn't get up the nerve. Then, sure enough, I heard a cough: Harry couldn't wait, I guessed, and I looked out - with one eye. I saw the same people, the same altar, and these Kains, very stiff and serious, nodding and swaying while they dovened, (chanted). And my eyesight was still good, and so was Harry's. Then we ran out afterwards, and laughed and danced around: Hurrah, we did it! Then I says to Harry; how did you get up the gall to do it? Same way you did, he answers. No, I mean weren't you afraid to give the signal? Waddeyemean, he asked me, I didn't give the signal - you did! Holy Smoke! We thought sure we were going to be damned: who, or what, had given the signal? Then we figured it out that an old Jew standing next to us had coughed, and we mistook it for the signal. Just to make sure, we did the stunt over again several times, finally looking out of both eyes, and then we knew we were safe. We even told Harry's father what we had one, but he insisted that God was being generous with us, but that we'd better not try it again.

After I was bar Mitzvahed (confirmed) I never went back to schul. But I'm not sorry at all that I went. On certain holidays, we kids would get free meals; on the joyful ones, you know, when they baked delicious cakes and cookies we never could get enough of them. Then [w?] would do little things around the synagogue for the shammas - he's like a sexton in a church, and it gave us a good feeling of belonging somewheres. I didn't mind the schul. . .

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Yes, Brook Avenue was very colorful in the old days. Irish and a few Germans lived there as well as Jews. Bathgate Avenue - with the pushcarts and everything there 6 now, you'd never believe it - was an exclusive residential street where the "Goyim" [(?) (Gentiles) lived. It was all private houses, lawns, and trees, and one side of the street was a cliff about two stories high: they blasted that through years later. On election nights, we used to build terrific bonfires with wood we had collected for days beforehand; we even took wagons apart to get fuel for those fires, and once we stole a couple of pushcarts; we sure raised hell. One election night we made a fire under the EI at Claremont Parkway and Third; it was so big that it partly burned the station down; the engines came clanging to the scene, but the station was so badly burned that it took a week to rebuild it. And of course it gave the gang that built the fire so much more prestige.

Maybe this isn't really the kind of stuff you want. The only legend I know about, if you can call it a legend, is the one about the "Wolvsies." I mean it's a legend because nobody ever saw them, at least none of us kids, so it's possible they never even existed, though everyone talked about them and feared them. The story was that these "Wolvsies" were a terrific, marauding gang of Jew-haters who took a special delight in pulling the beards of old, defenceless Jews. They were supposed to be seven brothers, and their haunt was the Grand Concourse. There weren't many Jews in that section of the Bronx, so that beards were something of a novelty to kids anyway. Well the legend was so strong that an old Jew would feel he was practically feel he was taking his life in his hands if he dared to cross the Concourse alone. It was just a bridle path then, and no amount of cops could patrol the place properly. Well nothing ever happened except that rumors were always going around about what this one had seen, and that one had heard, but nobody actually saw the "Wolvsies.". Only once, when I was about fifteen years old, did I hear one bewhiskered Jew, very excited, tell about how somebody or something grabbed his beard - "a bunch of bummers" was the only description he could give, and the way he told it, he had escaped with his life only by divine assistance. He claimed they pulled out some of his whiskers, and the gang of kids surrounding him stared at him with respect, but I looked

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very carefully, and it 7 seemed to be a very luxurious and complete crop, with no hairs missing at all. To this day I suspect he was stretching the story a bit, and just wanted to be the center of attraction.